

1

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Federal Highway Administration, in partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, the National Park Service, the National Capital Planning Commission, and the Commission of Fine Arts, is proposing to improve access to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The proposed action would include both transportation and urban design improvements as described in Chapter 2 of this environmental assessment (EA). This EA analyzes the potential environmental impacts from implementing the proposed action. The EA has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, the Council on Environmental Quality's Regulations for Implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508), the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Environmental Impact and Related Procedures (23 CFR 771), and FHWA's *Guidance for Preparing and Processing Environmental and Section 4(f) Documents* (FHWA Technical Advisory T 6640.8A, October 30, 1987). This EA is the culmination of the Kennedy Center Access Improvements (KCAI) project's final study phase.

- **Phase 1:** Data collection. The final report of this phase was the *Kennedy Center Access Improvements Existing Conditions Report* (FHWA, 2003a).
- **Phase 2:** Alternatives development and analysis. The final report for this phase was the *Kennedy Center Access Improvements Candidate Alternatives Report* (FHWA, 2003b). The full range of alternatives developed and their evaluation are summarized in Chapter 2 of this EA.
- **Phase 3:** Evaluation of alternatives and study recommendations. The final report for this phase is this EA, which documents the impacts of the final group of alternatives considered and describes the evaluation process that will lead to selection of a preferred alternative and final study recommendations following review of public comments on this EA.

1.1 Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

1.1.1 Purpose of the Proposed Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to improve access to The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (hereafter, the Kennedy Center or the Center) in Washington, DC. The Kennedy Center is a Congressionally-designated national showcase for the performing arts and a living memorial to President Kennedy. With dual roles, the Center attracts more than two million visitors a year – one million for performances and the remainder for educational activities and tours of the building and memorial. The Center is located on the Potomac River at the western edge of the District of Columbia's (hereafter, District) Monumental Core. Figure 1-1 (Location of the Kennedy Center) and Figure 1-2 (The Kennedy Center and Environs) in Appendix A show the Center's place in the region and in Washington, DC.

1.1.2 Need for the Proposed Action

The Kennedy Center's proximity to regional highways and transit facilities contributes to the Center's success in drawing visitors and patrons. However, compromises made to accommodate the Center on its site between the Potomac Freeway (I-66) and the Potomac River have resulted in conditions that make the final leg of a journey to the Center challenging, particularly for those on foot or bicycle. Current Kennedy Center access challenges underlie the need for the proposed action. These access problems include:

- **Nearby roadways are congested during evening pre-performance periods.** Patrons who attend nighttime performances at the Center travel at the end of the Washington region's rush hour. Evening peak-period commuter traffic overlaps with evening-Kennedy-Center-performance-bound traffic, leading to high levels of congestion on the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway (hereafter, Rock Creek Parkway), and on the bridge ramps from the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge (hereafter, Roosevelt Bridge) and Arlington Memorial Bridge (hereafter, Memorial Bridge). The awkward connection between Rock Creek Parkway and the Potomac Freeway via local roads causes delays and impedes access to the Center before and after performances. This connection was left unresolved when development of the larger Inner Loop Expressway (see Appendix C, Section C-1) was abandoned in the early 1970s. During the evening pre-performance period, intersections along Rock Creek Parkway, Ohio Drive, and Virginia Avenue suffer from both congestion and high accident rates.
- **Roadways form a barrier.** To the east, the Potomac Freeway and the E Street Expressway cut the Kennedy Center off from direct connection to the National Mall and the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, effectively isolating the Center, particularly from pedestrian travel.
- **Roads around the Center are heavily used.** Nearly 200,000 vehicles a day traverse the complex of ramps and roadways adjacent to the Center. Proposed access improvements must continue to serve this traffic so that traffic is not backed up onto the Roosevelt Bridge or diverted to local streets.
- **Parking at the Kennedy Center is often inadequate.** When all theaters are operating, the current parking supply available beneath the Kennedy Center is insufficient to meet the demand, and this will be true even after the Center finishes its current parking expansion program (see Appendix D). The result is spillover parking at satellite locations and on local streets. The Kennedy Center envisions two new buildings for education and administration/rehearsal space that would increase the demand for parking spaces in the future.
- **Pedestrian and bicycle access to the Center is indirect and unsafe.** There is no direct pedestrian or bicycle path to the Center from the National Mall to the southeast and to President's Park (the White House and grounds) to the east, and connections to the waterfront are inadequate. Pedestrians and bicyclists who approach the Center from the south along the Potomac River encounter a substandard portal on the west side of the Rock Creek Parkway under the Roosevelt Bridge. With no dedicated crossing available, pedestrians frequently dash across the Parkway near a blind corner on the Center's southwestern end. Those approaching from Georgetown must use an indirect,

unsigned, unlit, and underdeveloped path. There are no direct connections from the east, so pedestrians improvise by sprinting across the Potomac Freeway.

- **Transit access is inconvenient.** The Foggy Bottom Metrorail Station is half of a mile from the Center, which is an uncomfortable walking distance for many patrons. Although the Center runs a successful Show Shuttle service that carries visitors between the Metrorail station and the Center, the route is indirect and runs through the historic Foggy Bottom neighborhood. One Metrobus route serves the Center directly, but the number of visitors using this route is low. Visitors who elect to walk from the Metrorail station have difficulty finding their way because the Center is not visible from the station, and there are no directional signs to guide them.
 - **Waterfront access from the Center is difficult.** Although located on the Potomac River, the Center is separated from the water by Rock Creek Parkway and a pedestrian/bicycle trail. Plans to connect the Center's West Terrace to the trail were never implemented. Therefore, no safe, designated pedestrian access from the Center to the river or the trail exists.
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1.1.3 Project Goals

In light of the access problems delineated above, the goals of the KCAI project are to:

- Enhance access to the Kennedy Center by remedying conditions that create congestion and delay. Two areas are of particular concern: the connection between the Rock Creek Parkway and the Potomac Freeway, and the intersection of Ohio Drive with the Rock Creek Parkway and the Potomac Freeway.
 - Establish linkages between the Kennedy Center and the National Mall, the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, Georgetown, and President's Park.
 - Increase safety by reducing conflicts between pedestrians, bicyclists, and motor vehicles and by improving areas prone to high rates of traffic accidents.
 - Enhance the aesthetic quality of the Foggy Bottom neighborhood.
 - Improve pedestrian and bicycle access to and around the Kennedy Center.
 - Improve directional signage for those seeking the Kennedy Center.
 - Improve access between the Kennedy Center and the riverfront.
 - Improve the setting of the Kennedy Center in keeping with its function and importance as a national monument and cultural center, and enhance its connection with the city.
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1.1.4 Enabling Legislation

A provision of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA 21, Public Law 105-178, June 9, 1998) directed the Secretary of Transportation, in cooperation with the District of Columbia, the Kennedy Center, and the Department of the Interior and in consultation with other interested persons, to conduct a study of methods to improve pedestrian and vehicular access to the Kennedy

Center (Section 2124 [a] [1]). Two studies resulted from this directive. The first – the Kennedy Center Access Study (KCAS) – began in 1998 and concluded in 2000; it is described more fully in Appendix D. The second is the current project – KCAI – that is funded under Section 378 of the Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2001.

On September 18, 2002, the President signed the John F. Kennedy Center Plaza Authorization Act of 2002. This act authorizes the appropriation of \$400,000,000 for capital costs incurred in the planning, design, engineering, and construction of Kennedy Center access improvements for fiscal years 2003 through 2010.

1.2 Study Area

Figure 1-3 (Base Study Area) in Appendix A illustrates the base study area for this project, which is located at the western end of the Monumental Core of Washington, DC. For analytical purposes, the base study area has been divided into three sectors – North Sector, Center Sector, and South Sector – as may be seen on Figure 1-3. The whole study area is located in the Northwest Quadrant of the District of Columbia; street names in this quadrant normally include the designation “NW.” In this EA, the NW designation is assumed for all streets in the study area, and the descriptor will not be included (i.e., 24th Street, NW will be referred to as 24th Street). Quadrant designation will be included only for streets that are not in the Northwest Quadrant.

The western boundary of the study area is the Potomac River and 30th Street, NW north to M Street, NW. The northern boundary runs briefly along M Street. As can be seen in Figure 1-3, the eastern boundary begins at M and 30th Streets, proceeds southeast along Pennsylvania Avenue, then south along 26th Street to I Street, where it runs east to 25th Street, then south along 25th Street to H Street, then east along H Street to 24th Street, then south again along 24th Street to Virginia Avenue, along which it runs southeast until turning south on 23rd Street to E Street. It then runs east along E Street to 20th Street, turns south on 20th Street to D Street, where it turns west along D Street to 23rd Street, at which point it proceeds south around the Lincoln Memorial to the southern edge of the Memorial Bridge ramps. The southern boundary includes the traffic circle around the Lincoln Memorial and the ramps at the eastern end of the Memorial Bridge.

The limits of the study area are defined by the extent of the transportation access problem areas identified in the earlier KCAS. By necessity, some of the analysis for this study includes data collected and analyzed from a larger area than the study area (as for instance, for visual impacts and air quality). However, the majority of the data collected and most of the analysis of conditions are focused within the study area.

1.3 Background

1.3.1 History

To a large extent, the transportation and urban design issues that the KCAI project aims to address are the unintended consequences of past planning efforts in Washington, DC, as well as

compromises that were made to fund and build the Kennedy Center. In essence, these issues derive from the physical and aesthetic constraints imposed on the selected site by a never-completed freeway system (the Inner Loop) built as the Center was being planned. The Roosevelt Bridge and the Potomac Freeway are remnants of this freeway system. From the beginning, critics as well as supporters of the Center recognized that, while they made it regionally accessible, the roadways around the Kennedy Center detracted from the spectacular river setting chosen by the Center's founders. A more detailed account is provided in Appendix C, Section C1.

1.3.2 Plans and Studies that Contribute to the Proposed Action

In 1997, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) published a plan that addressed, among other things, the Kennedy Center's access problems and weak connection to the remainder of the Monumental Core: *Extending the Legacy: Planning America's Capital for the 21st Century*. In 1999 NCPC expanded on ideas presented in the *Extending the Legacy* plan in *Washington's Waterfronts: an Analysis of Issues and Opportunities along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers*. These two plans presented a vision of the Kennedy Center's reconnection to the Monumental Core. NCPC's plans set the stage for Congressional action in 1998 that directed the Secretary of Transportation to study methods to improve pedestrian and vehicular access to the Kennedy Center. In response to the 1998 mandate, FHWA prepared and issued the KCAS in 2000. These efforts, which led up to the current KCAI project, are described in more detail in Appendix D.

1.3.3 Other Studies, Plans, and Projects in the Study Area

There are seven plans and projects underway in the KCAI study area that could have a cumulative effect on the study and this project:

- The National Park Service's (NPS) Georgetown Waterfront Plan.
- The District Department of Transportation's (DDOT) Roosevelt Bridge Study.
- The Kennedy Center Improved Access and Parking Project.
- The NPS Lincoln Memorial Circle Rehabilitation and Security Project.
- FHWA's study of restoring westbound E Street traffic in front of the White House.
- The NPS Rock Creek Park and Parkway Management Plan.
- NCPC, Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), and the National Capital Memorial Commission's (NCMC) Memorials and Museums Master Plan.

A summary of each plan is provided in Appendix D. Coordination with these plans and projects has been ongoing.

1.4 Agency Coordination

The KCAI project is being managed by FHWA in partnership with DDOT, the Kennedy Center, NPS, NCPC, and CFA. A memorandum of agreement dated November 13, 2001 describes the relationships of the agencies participating in planning for the KCAI project. These six agencies formed a steering committee that met monthly at the Kennedy Center to review the progress of the work, to comment, and to make suggestions and recommendations. The District of Columbia Office of Planning (DCOP) participated in many steering committee meetings, and other agencies did on occasion.

The proposed action has been brought before NCPC and CFA for informational purposes and for informal review and discussion. Formal reviews by NCPC and CFA will occur following this EA.

Coordination meetings were held with other agencies and entities with an interest in the study area and the proposed action to exchange information and receive comments on the project. Coordination meetings were held with the following entities:

- US State Department
- US Institute for Peace
- Foggy Bottom and West End Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC 2A)
- Foggy Bottom Association
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- Downtown Business Improvement District
- District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs
- District of Columbia Office of Planning
- District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer
- Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
- Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

1.5 Public Involvement

Public involvement has been a full-fledged component of the KCAI project from its inception. In addition to the meetings with local citizen organizations mentioned above, FHWA has reached out to the larger public by holding two public information meetings at the Kennedy Center and making information on the project available on the internet. By these means, FHWA has kept the public informed about the progress of the study and provided a conduit for input from interested citizens.

1.5.1 April 3, 2002 Meeting

The first public information meeting was held on Wednesday, April 3, 2002 in the Grand Foyer of the Kennedy Center, from 6 PM to 9:30 PM. The primary goal of this meeting was to solicit general comments and opinions on the project from interested members of the public. The purpose of the meeting was to reacquaint the public with the project. The conclusions of the KCAS, completed in

2000, were reviewed. Attendees were provided with as much general information on the current status of the project as was available at this early stage.

The meeting was advertised 28 days in advance in *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times*. Two weeks before the meeting, a notice was mailed to the 236 persons, agencies, or organizations on the project's mailing list, developed based on the list used for the KCAS project. FHWA also issued a press release announcing the meeting. The meeting was held in an open-house format with no formal presentation.

A total of 55 people signed in, and FHWA received 21 written comments. Most consisted of suggestions for access improvements by car, transit, bicycle, or foot. The comments received indicated a general agreement among the interested public on the need to improve access to the Kennedy Center, although they proposed various ways of achieving this goal.

1.5.2 August 7, 2002 Meeting

A second public information meeting was held on Wednesday, August 7, 2002, in the Grand Foyer of the Kennedy Center, from 6 PM to 9:30 PM. The primary purpose of this meeting was to present the preliminary alternatives developed by the project team. These alternatives are described in more detail in Chapter 2 of this EA (Alternatives 4V and 4D, developed later, were not presented at this meeting).

The meeting was advertised in *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* on July 9, 2002, in *The Georgetown* on July 11, 2002, and in the *Georgetown Current* on July 17, 2002. A notice was mailed to the 270 persons, agencies, or organizations on the project's mailing list. The meeting was held in an open-house format with no formal presentation.

A total of 35 people signed in, and FHWA received 13 written comments. Several people expressed strong reservations about Alternatives 7 through 10, which emphasized restoring the historic street grid and removing the Potomac Freeway. Following the meeting, FHWA received an additional 54 written comments. With few exceptions, these comments were from residents of the Foggy Bottom neighborhood who strongly opposed the changes to 26th Street, I Street, and Queen Anne's Lane proposed under Alternatives 7 through 10. In most cases, the authors requested that an environmental impact statement (EIS) be prepared if these alternatives were considered any further. Several people warned of strong neighborhood opposition should these alternatives remain under consideration.

1.5.3 Website

Since April 2002, FHWA has regularly updated web pages describing the progress of the KCAI project. The website also allows people to download information and to email comments or requests to be added to the mailing list. The project's web pages will continue to be updated as needed until completion of the KCAI EA. An electronic version of the EA will be available for download from the site. The web address for the KCAI project is:

http://www.efl.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/Kennedy/kc_ea_index.htm.

1.5.4 Next Steps

About two weeks after publication of this EA, a third public meeting will be held in the Grand Foyer of the Kennedy Center to receive comments. Both the publication of the EA and the public meeting will be advertised to the general public and the persons, groups, and organizations on the project's mailing list. The public will have 30 days from the publication of the EA to send comments to FHWA. Comments on this EA may be sent to:

Mr. Douglas M. Laird
Project Manager
Federal Highway Administration
US Department of Transportation
400 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20590
douglas.laird@fhwa.dot.gov

Comments must be postmarked before November 10, 2003.

1.6 Environmental Assessment Issues

1.6.1 Issues Addressed in This EA

Based on the nature of the proposed action and information collected on the existing study area conditions, this EA focuses on the following impact issues:

- **Parkland:** Direct and indirect effects on NPS parkland under Section 4(f) of the 1966 US Department of Transportation (USDOT) Act as amended. The study area is rich in national parkland, including West Potomac Park and the Rock Creek Parkway, one of the main transportation corridors through the study area.
- **Cultural resources:** Effects on cultural resources including known and unknown archaeological sites, architectural resources, and historic districts under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and Section 4(f) of the USDOT Act. As with parkland, the study area is well endowed with nationally recognized cultural resources.
- **Aesthetics and viewsheds:** Because this proposed action is located in the National Capital's Monumental Core, many of the vistas are protected as part of memorials or historic districts. The vistas for the streets laid out in accordance with the L'Enfant Plan are also protected.
- **Land use, plans, and zoning:** The interplay between this proposed action and existing land use patterns, zoning, and plans for the study area, the District, and the National Capital Region.
- **Transportation system:** The impacts of transportation system and urban design improvements on vehicular traffic, pedestrian and bicycle traffic, transit systems, and river traffic.

- **Air quality:** Temporary construction-related and long-term changes in local and regional air quality levels resulting from the proposed transportation and urban design improvements.
- **Noise levels:** Temporary construction-related and long-term changes to ambient noise levels in the study area as a result of this proposed action. This area is relatively noisy now even for an urban area because of high traffic volumes, overhead aircraft take-offs and landings, and helicopter fly-bys.
- **Socioeconomic conditions and community facilities:** The effect of the proposed action on the Foggy Bottom neighborhood and community facilities.
- **Kennedy Center operations and management:** How the proposed action would affect current Kennedy Center operations and management.
- **Natural resources:** Temporary construction-related impacts and long-term impacts on the study area's natural resources, particularly floodplains, topography, and the Potomac River.
- **Waterways:** The Potomac River and the channellized portion of Rock Creek are considered "navigable waters" under Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act. Potential impacts on these navigable waters are considered under "Natural Resources." No impacts are expected.
- **Hazardous materials:** Disposal of contaminated excavated materials, such as the study area's soils that may contain coal tar residues.

Chapter 3 of this EA describes the existing conditions for each resource area. Chapter 4 presents the impact analysis of the proposed action on these resource areas.

1.6.2 Issues Dismissed from Further Impact Analysis

Initial analysis of impacts on the following resources has indicated that the proposed action would either not affect them or have only negligible effects on them. Therefore, impacts on these resources are briefly addressed below and then dismissed from further consideration and evaluation.

- **Residential Displacement:** No residences would be removed or displaced by the proposed action.
- **Environmental Justice:** Executive Order 12898 requires federal agencies to identify and address disproportionately high and adverse impacts on minority and low-income populations. The proposed action would not disproportionately affect minority populations. No public comments addressed this issue, and the demographic analysis in Subchapter 3.9 indicates that the population of the study area is primarily white. Although about a quarter of the study area residents appear to be living below poverty thresholds, this results from the presence of a large student population associated with The George Washington University, not from the presence of a settled impoverished community. Non-student residents live well above the poverty thresholds.
- **Coastal Zone Management:** The District of Columbia does not have a coastal zone management program or a designated coastal zone.

- **Wetlands:** A review of National Wetland Inventory maps prepared by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and a field investigation by a wetland biologist confirmed the absence of vegetated wetlands (as defined by the US Army Corps of Engineers) in the study area under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.
 - **Wildlife:** The study area is a developed and highly disturbed urban environment, with little natural habitat available for wildlife. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has determined that, with the exception of occasional transient individuals, there are no federally-listed species in the study area. USFWS concluded that no Biological Assessment or further Section 7 consultation is necessary for species under its jurisdiction. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has jurisdiction over some aquatic species that may use the Potomac River in the study area. The only listed species that NMFS identified as potentially being in the study area is the shortnose sturgeon. Coordination with NMFS is ongoing.
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1.7 The National Environmental Policy Act Process

NEPA provides for the consideration of environmental issues in federal agency planning and decision making. Under NEPA, federal agencies must prepare an EIS or an EA for any federal action, except for those actions that the proposing agency determines to be “categorically excluded.” An EIS is prepared for those federal actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment.

An EA is a public document that serves to provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an EIS. An EA results in either a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) or a decision to prepare an EIS. If FHWA determines that the proposed action might have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, an EIS would be prepared.